THE AUGUR

VOL. 1 NO. 7 – AUGUST, 1977 PRICE: $1.00/$8.00 PER YEAR

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE BIBLICAL NUMISMATIC SOCIETY

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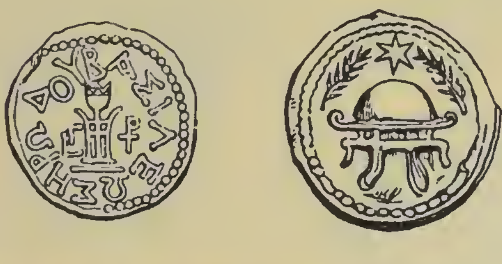
Mel Wacks NLG
Editor

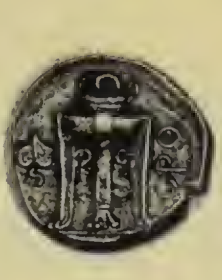


Large bronze denomination ("Chalkous") of Herod the Great with tripod and thymiaterion (?).

Coin of the Month

HEROD'S PAGAN SYMBOLS

The largest coin of Herod the Great (37-4 BC) features a tripus (tripod) on the obverse, and a helmet or thymiaterion on the reverse. A tripus was generally anything supported on three legs; most likely it was a stand made of bronze or marble which was dedicated in a temple or used as an altar . . . indicating Herod's pro-Roman feelings. This is not surprising, as it was the might of Rome that enabled Herod to overthrow the last of the Maccabean dynasty - Antigonus Mattathias. Similiar tripods are found on Greek coins, notably those of Croton (Italy), Philippi (Macedonia), et al. And even closer to Judaea, both geographically and chronologically, the tripod was used on coins of the Seleucids (Syria), where it was symbolic with the worship of Apollo.



Tripod on Coin of Croton.

The inscription around the tripod is BAΣIΛEΩΣ HPΩΔOY (King Herod); on the left is the date L Γ (Year 3). The next question is the third year from what? Most likely it was struck in 37 BC . . . the year that Herod established himself in power by the taking of Jerusalem . . . and three years after he received the title "King of Judaea" from the Romans. In the right field is the enigmatic monogram ⳨, which De Saulcey (1857) claimed was a combination of "T" and "P" . . . an abbreviation of the denomination Trichalkous, however this is extremely unlikely since the same monogram also appears on three different smaller bronze coins struck by Herod in the same year. Professor Kanael suggests that the monogram stands for TPITOΣ, that is "third," and is a repitition of the year. But Meshorer states, "this suggestion is not very convincing, since it is not clear why Herod should twice have indicated the same year on a coin," and goes on to say that "no satisfactory solution of the problem (of the monogram) has been offered."

The interesting object on the reverse is usually referred to as a thymiaterion (Hellenistic cult-object) or Dioscuri helmet; a third possibility is Hermes' (Mercury's) hat. Meshorer indicates that "the symbols on the coins of Herod provide ample scope for divergent views . . . which may well continue for a long time." Thus Jews could have interpreted them one way, and non-Jews another (e.g. the enigmatic thymiaterion).

The star above might lend support to the Dioscuri helmet theory, for this is the way which the Dioscuri helmet was generally depicted numismatically . . . however the rounded object itself doesn't really look like the conical Dioscuri hat. Could there be some connection with the bas relief of a Dioscuri helmet which was found in excavations at Samaria on a building erected by Herod?

The hemispherical flat bottomed object with two flaps below also resembles Hermes' hat - the petasus. Perhaps those two "flaps" actually represent Hermes' wings at rest? Another important symbol of Hermes - his staff (caduceus) - is found on a number of Herod's coins!

Madden speculates that the star may refer either to the conquest of Jerusalem by Herod on the Jewish Day of Atonement, or to the Dioscuri, or to something else. Over 100 years ago, Cavedoni wrote that the palm (?) branches flanking the thymiaterion represent the "two olive trees . . . one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side thereof" in Zechariah's vision (Zech. 4:3). Madden believed that the branches probably alluded to Herod's victory.

Herod's symbols, meant to be non-committal to his Jewish subjects and Roman friends, just as successfully elude our interpretation 2000 years later!

Herod's large bronze coin, shown in the accompanying slide, is in the collection of Museum Haaretz, Tel-Aviv. The obverse is well centered, but the reverse (thymiaterion) is about 25% off center . . . a rather common occurrence with the individually hand struck ancient Judaean coins.

Statue of Hermes. (Capitoline Museum, Rome.)

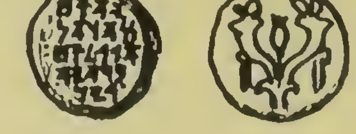
Biblical Numystery Number Five

WHAT WHERE THE DENOMINATIONS OF JUDAEAN COINS?

The Ancients generally did not indicate a denomination on their coins. The people had to value their coins by the size and weight, and also the designs.

The ancient Judaean coins reflected the coinage systems of their neighbors - the Syrians and the Romans - to facilitate trade. The bronze coins of the Seleucids (Syria), who dominated Judaea during most of the second century B.C., can be divided into the following denominations; The range of weights as computed by Edgar Rogers and Newell are included: Chalkous (5.01 - 8.58 gm, 19 - 21 mm), Hemi-Chalkous (2.87 gm-4.08 gm, 16-18 mm), Dilepton (1.55-2.92 gm, 14.0-18.5 mm), and Lepton (about 1.1 gm, 10-11 mm). Here, in addition to weight and size, which can overlap, denominations are further deliniated by the designs of a gallery, prow, palm tree, and club respectively.

The basic coin of the Hasmoneans, starting with John Hyrcanus I, c. 110-104 B.C. (assuming the Reifenberg-Kindler system of attribution) is the dilepton denomination, more generally called the "prutah".



Dilepton (Prutah)
John Hyrcanus I

While an ample supply of silver coins were available to the Judaeans from Tyre and Sidon (Phoenicia), as well as Ptolemais, Jaffa, Ascalon and Gaza, Kindler writes, "I am, however, unable to explain why the Hasmoneans, though politically independent and strong, did not issue any silver coins, whereas their Nabatean neighbors did. The answer to this may, however, be the lack of silver resources." According to Rostoftzeff, there was also a scarcity of gold and silver coins as the fortunes of the Greek world declined in the end of the 2nd and 1st century B.C.; as a result there was government hoarding of precious metals and the bronze coinage assumed a more important role.

The first Hasmonean to issue subdivisions of the dilepton (prutah) was Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.) who also was the most prolific minter of the Maccabean dynasty. His bronzes included squarish leptons (more properly, lepta) and tiny hemileptons. The designs of all three bronzes were identical . . . the star/anchor type.

The Hasmonean leptons ranged from 10-13mm, 0.85-1.65gm; the hemileptons are 6-9 mm, about 0.24 gm.

Until the last years of the reign of John Hyrcanus II there was no Judaean coin larger than the dilepton, most of which fall within 1.75-2.6 grams, though pieces are known as light as 1.08 grams up to 3.5 grams. Evidently these were weighed in lots, probably 100 to 500 coins, to meet the standards for the average coin. Hyrcanus II in about 42-40 B.C., did introduce a larger bronze coin of the trilepton (1½ prutah) denomination (about 18mm, 3.71 grams); the designs are two adjacent cornucopiae, arranged like Syrian and Egyptian coinage, and a helmet.

The most revolutionary changes in Hasmonean coinage took place during the relatively brief and tempestous rule (considering the battle with the Herodians) of the last ruler of that noble line - Antigonus Mattathias (40-37 B.C.). He not only issued the extremely rare and famous menorah coin; but also added two large denominations, apparently on the Syrian chalkous and dichalkous standards. The large bronze dichalkous has two cornucopiae and has a weight range from 12.65 to 16.45 grams; the smaller chalkous has only a single horn of plenty, weighing in at 5.91 to 11.37 grams.

Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.) continued the Hasmonean monetary tradition, including the large chalkous denomination of his predecessor. His most common coin is the dileption type with caduceus between two cornucopiae, and an anchor on the other side. His coinage designs were quite diverse; one series dated in 37 B.C. offers a particularly interesting variety of mostly pagan symbols - tripod/thymiaterion on the chalkous (23.0-25.5mm, 5.20-9.69 grams), helmet/shield hemichalkous (19-20.5 grams, 3.57-5.76mm), caduceus/pomegranate triplepton (about 18 grams, 3.08-3.60mm), and the aphlaston/palm branch dilepton (15.5-17.0 grams, 2.02-2.75mm).

Herod's son, Herod Archelaus (4 B.C.-6 A.D.) continued the Hasmonean denominations, but confined himself to the three smallest coins, all with double cornucopiae (Egyptian style) and a galley. These were issued as leptons, dileptons, and trileptons.

The coinage of Herod Antipas (4 B.C.-39 A.D.) and Herod Phillip II (4 B.C.-34 A.D.) completely diverge from the Hasmonean coins, evidently adapting to contemporary independent city coinage of the area (e.g. Ascalon). These bronzes are of unknown denominations and are referred to merely as small, medium, and large.

Herod Agrippa I (37-44 A.D.) issued coins on the city standard in the non-Jewish areas he controlled, but returned to the dilepton (equivalent to the Roman quadrans) for his Jewish subjects. Thus one of the most common of all ancient Judaean coins - the unique umbrella/barley dilepton (prutah) was minted in 42/43 A.D.

The procurator series, starting in 6 A.D., was interrupted briefly by the Agrippa I dilepton, and then continued through 58/59 A.D. Interestingly, the Procurator dileptons struck before Agrippa I weigh 0.83-2.69 grams (14-19mm), while the Agrippa dileptons increased to 1.96-3.20 grams (17-19mm), and the Procurator coins struck thereafter range from 1.15-3.84 grams (14-19mm). The Roman bronze quadrans of this period (under Nero) weigh up to 3.21 grams, and are 17-18mm, similar to the dileptons of Agrippa I and the Procurators that followed.

The last Judaean-struck dileptons (prutahs) were minted by the Jewish revolutionaries in the second and third year of the First Revolt (66-70 A.D.) They were the prevalent coinage in this period as they had been ever since the first Hasmonean issued almost 200 years earlier.

Of course the famous silver Jewish Shekels and Half Shekels were also minted during the five years of the revolt. The Shekel would have roughly corresponded with the Greek/Roman Tetradrachm; the Half Shekel with two denarii.

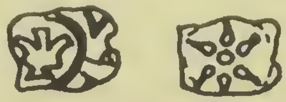
The other First Revolt coins were three large bronze pieces, produced as "emergency money" in the fourth year of the disastrous war - these indicated "Half", "Quarter", and the smallest is presumably an "Eighth". These are hypothetically meant to be fractions of a Shekel.

The coins of the Bar Kochba (132-135 A.D.) were all overstruck on city coins, Roman coins, and whatever else was circulating in Palestine when the Second Revolt broke out. Thus the silver denominations are generally referred to as a tetradrachm and denarius, however at the time they were struck they were ciled "sela" and "sus" respectively (as noted in the miraculously surviving Bar Kochba letters). The bronze denominaions are unknown as is the case for all city coins.

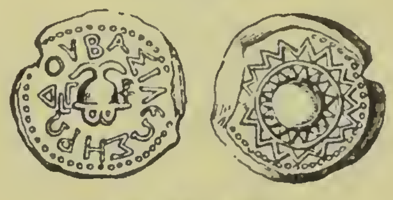
WHAT WAS A DILEPTON REALLY WORTH?

The denarius was approximately a day's pay for a laborer in Judaea in the time of Jesus: "And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny (denarius) a day, he sent them into his veneyard" (Matthew 20:2). To determine the value of a Judaean bronze dilepton, it was equal to the Roman quadrans, which was 1/64 of a denarius. Assuming a ten hour work-day, a dilepton would be earned in a little less than ten minutes. On the other hand, the Procurator Tiberius Alexander (c. 48 AD) received a salary of 100,000 sesterces per year, equivalent to 1.6 million dileptons!

Mel Wacks


Lepton
Alexander Jannaeus

Dichalkous
Antigonus Mattathias


Hemichalkous
Herod the Great

Medium Bronze
(Unknown Denomination)
Herod Phillip II

Silver Shekel
First Revolt

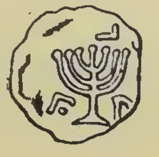
Silver Sus (Denarius)
Second Revolt

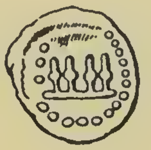
The Most Desirable Coin of Judaea

by

Mel Wacks

The most popular coin of ancient Judaea is undoubtedly the silver Shekel of the First Revolt. The honor of being the rarest ancient Judaean coin is shared by the two unique types of silver Quarter Shekels of the First Revolt. But the most desirable, I suspect, is the small bronze coin struck by Antigonus Mattathias, the last of the Maccabean rulers, with a seven branched menorah on one side and a somewhat puzzling object on the other.





The seven menorah lamps are thought to represent the "seven stars (planets) that roam the world" according to Midrach Tadshe, ch. 11, Nu. Rabbah 15:5. The original gold menorah. described in great detail in the Bible (Exodus 25:31-40, 37:17-24) stood in the Sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple, near to the Holy of Holies. It was the prize spoil in the victory procession through the streets of Rome following the fall of the Temple in 70 A.D. It was also depicted on Titus' Arch - and this portrayal was copied by the Modern State of Israel as its emblem.

The details of the menorah - the knobs, flowers and cups are not shown on the coin of Antigonus. This is due perhaps "to the small size of the design on the coins" says Romanoff (Jewish Symbols on Ancient Jewish Coins, 1944). Professor Louis Ginzberg holds that the knobs, flowers and cups are perhaps omitted in accordance with the Halaka (Jewish law) not to reproduce exactly the funiture of the Temple. In any case, the Temple Menorah never again was portrayed on an ancient Judaean coin, not even on Bar Kochba's Second Revolt issues which showed the exterior of the Holy of Holies and some of the other articles used in the Temple services - trumpets, amphora and lyre. The seven branched palm tree most likely represents the menorah, which in turn represented the seven known planets, on the later coins of Judaea - struck during the First and Second Revolts, and even on the Roman Judaea Capta coins.

The inscription surrounding the menorah on Antigonus' historic coin is fragmentary; it reads "King Antigonus" in Greek (BAΣΙΛΕΩΣ ANTIΓONOY).

And now let us discuss the questionable design on the other side.

Madden (Coins of the Jews, 1903) calls this object "four trees planted parallel, or bunches of flowers and fruit." He compares this type to the top of the cornucopiae on the coins of herod Archealus which evidently were intended to represent "flowers and fruit".

Hill (British Museum Catalog, Palestine, 1914) cops out on this symbol, calling it an "object represented by a horizontal line from which rise four verticals, swelling in the middle and tapering to their tops."

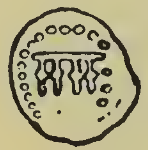
Romanoff indicates that this "can be considered to represent either the four corners or horns of the golden altar or the four crowns (thorns) of the Table of the Shew bread, both of which were, like the Menorah itself, found in the Sanctuary. This emblem may as well suggest the earth. As the Menorah symbolized the heavenly bodies, the obverse may refer to the earth believed then to be flat and supported by pillars (b. Hag. 12b)."

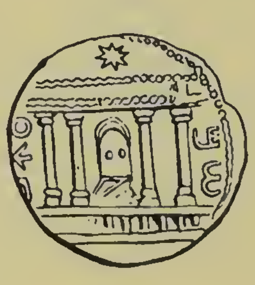
Interestingly, Madden had rejected part of the aforementioned theory forth years before it was expressed by Romanoff, writing "M. de Saulcy has, however, been misled in considering the 'four trees' or 'fruit' upon this coin to be the 'table of shew-bread'." Reifenberg (1940) states that "the vessel represented on the obverse . . . is explained by de Saulcy as the table of shew-bread, a description which can only be accepted with reserve."

Meshorer (1967) continues to call this mysterious object a "showbread table" although he never expands upon this attribution. He does however, give some likely insight into the production of this tiny bronze enigma, writing that it was a "proclamation" to the inhabitants of Jerusalem to make every possible sacrifice in defense of the Temple (against the seige of Herod in 37 B.C.) to prevent its falling into the hands of "strangers" (e.g. the Romans and Herod). The coin was small, Meshorer goes on, to economize on copper which was much needed during the seige.

But what was the table of showbread (or shewbread)? According to the Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion, "In accordance with biblical precept (Exod. 25:30, Lev. 24:1-9), twelve loaves of fine flour (representing the twelve tribes), arranged in two rows, were placed each sabbath on the golden table in the sanctuary (and later in the Temple). They remained there until the following Sabbath, when they were replaced by twelve fresh loaves. The old loaves were then divided among the outgoing and incoming watches of priests for their consumption. Showbread may have been so-called because it was baked in a mold with two open sides.

Meshorer turns the "showbread table" upside down so that it has a flat "top" and four "legs" rather than the older view of four "trees". Looking at the design in this manner it bears a close resemblance (though greatly simplified) to the facade of the Temple of Jerusalem's Holy of Holies as depicted on the large silver Sela ("Tetradrachm") of Bar Kochba (132-135 A.D.). The four "legs" could represent the four columns shown on Bar Kochba's coins.





Careful examination of the menorah coin pictured by Meshorer reveals arches between the "legs" or columns as would be expected in the architectural rendering. Those small bulges on the "legs" could be a simplified representation of the widened bases of the columns.

Could there be anything more natural on this "proclamation" coin than the Temple around which Antigonus attempted to rally his beseiged populace?

Regretfully I have never personally seen an example of this very rare coin. However, careful examination of the photographs in Meshorer (No. 36) and especially Reifenberg (No. 24) appear to reveal two vertical dots in between the central vertical "legs". If indeed these dots can be verified on one of these coins it probably would be conclusive evidence that the device represents the Temple, for there are similar dots (albeit horizontal) indicating the carrying loops on the Ark of the Covenant on the silver Sela's of Bar Kochba.

Thus the most desirable ancient Jewish coin may be even more important than previously thought - containing the first representation of the Holy of Holies, in addition to the unique portrayal of the Temple menorah.